

Special Memorandum 31-65

Some Thoughts about the
Latin American Left

29 December 1965

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

29 December 1965

SPECIAL MEMORANDUM NO. 31-65

SUBJECT: Some Thoughts about the Latin American Left

1. The political spectrum in Latin America, compared to that here in the United States, is canted to the left. Generally when we consider political orientation in Latin America we do not use any local standard, but instead project our own familiar criteria of what is right, center or left. When we refer to the Latin American left in this way, we are, of course, talking about much the largest part of the political spectrum there. We are also talking about something that is remarkable for its diversity and lack of cohesiveness -- a strange (and sometimes wonderful) conglomeration of disparate, and usually competing, groups and parties.

2. The size of the Latin left is a natural outgrowth of the area's social and economic inequities: the relatively small number of the wealthy, the great mass of have-nots, the un-enlightened practices historically of most private capitalists,

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the slow and inefficient course of governmental reform programs. One element of the yearning in Latin America for transformation of the status quo -- and an element so pervasive as to constitute a major factor in itself -- has been the acceptance of one or another version of the historical interpretations of Karl Marx.

3. For large numbers, particularly among the intelligentsia, Marx's general approach and his treatment of the process of economic change make sense because they seem to be in accord with things that have happened and are happening in Latin America. Marxist doctrine is emphasized by professors in most universities, so much so that some of it tends to rub off on graduates of conservative persuasion as well as on those of the various hues of the left. Some use of Marxist jargon and slogans, moreover, is made by almost all parties of the left, not merely by the Communist and socialist ones.*

4. Nor do the labels which Latin American parties carry provide us with any sure guide as to what they stand for or

* This phenomenon can produce interesting titles for organizations. For instance, a branch of the Christian Democratic movement in Brazil calls itself, Catholic Youth for Struggle on Behalf of Marx and God.

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where they fit in the political spectrum. If a party's name has the word conservative in it, it is, in most cases, reactionary. If it contains the word liberal, it may be a little less reactionary. Inclusion of radical means it is probably conservative. Reform is likely to put it at or near center. Revolutionary almost always means to the left, but not necessarily to the far left. Socialist can mean practically anything -- from the far right position of the Socialist Falange of Bolivia to the far left position of the Socialist Parties of Chile and Uruguay. The parties which call themselves Communist are definitely on the left but in many Latin American countries are by no means the most extreme organizations of the left.

The Moderate Left

5. The moderate (or not-so-far-left) left is usually viewed hereabouts as a good thing, the best hope for the future, etc. And (forgive the term) rightly so. But this is a generalization we ought to handle with care; there is need to look hard and critically at the individual parties of the moderate left and at their leaders. On the one hand, we have organizations like the National Liberation Party of Figueres and Orlich in Costa Rica, the Democratic Action party in Venezuela

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with such leaders as Betancourt and Leoni, and the Christian Democrats in Chile with Frei at the helm. But on the other hand, there have been those people and parties of the moderate left whom many observers thought promising but who turned sour in one way or another -- e.g., Bosch in the Dominican Republic, Paz in Bolivia, Arévalo in Guatemala.

6. The road of the moderate leftist government is an arduous one. It seeks to bring about reform without violent revolution, but usually has to operate within an inherited legal framework and often has to cope with congressional, judicial, and military opposition. Seldom does a government that seeks to redistribute income get much cooperation from those minority elements who enjoy most of said income. Thus to govern successfully, a leader of the moderate left requires extraordinary acumen, patience, and administrative skill, along with the array of decent ideas and principles that characterize his political thought. Together with the danger that such a man will simply fail, there is the danger that he will resort to strong and ultimately to extreme means to achieve what he cannot accomplish otherwise. The lines in Latin America between the moderate and extreme left are neither fixed nor clearly

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drawn; this is one reason why a leader can move both rapidly and almost imperceptibly from the one to the other.

The Extreme Left

7. The problems of definition become even more difficult as we approach the extreme left of the political spectrum. For one thing, there are still active a number of parties left over from earlier times, e.g., the small group of anarchists in Argentina, the Trotskyite parties in Bolivia, Mexico, Argentina, and Peru. For another, the Communist movement as a whole is no longer much of a whole. In terms of number of adherents, the orthodox (ties-to-Moscow) Communist parties are still most important. The biggest of them -- including those in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Uruguay -- have held to tactics of cautious political action rather than violence or insurgency.* In Venezuela, the regular Communist party has long been participating in terrorist and guerrilla operations with the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR), but a faction in the party leadership now wants to call a halt to this. There are, at the same time, a

* The Chilean Communist Party, for example, has not only behaved in less extremist fashion than the Chilean Socialists but is now considering a limited degree of ad hoc cooperation with the Frei administration.

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number of other Communist parties and party splinters calling themselves Communists, which look to Cuba or Communist China for inspiration and which take part in, or counsel, violent methods.

8. By measure of the turbulence they are now producing -- and perhaps even by measure of their long-range potential -- the most troublesome organizations seem not to be the Communist parties but the extreme-nationalist, revolutionary leftist movements.* Often these organizations have some members or leaders who were once Communist party adherents; they have had particular success in competing for the allegiance of young people. These organizations take assistance from Cuba, Moscow or wherever, but, at least for the most part, run their own shows.

9. We have already mentioned the insurgency role of the MIR in Venezuela; so far its cooperation with the Communist party there has remained close. But the Movement of the Revolutionary Left in Peru undertook insurgency on its own; although a few Communist party members may later have been admitted to the guerrillas' ranks, the approval of Communist party leaders came

* We sometimes refer to these organizations as Castroist, but this should not be taken to imply dependence on the Cuban leader or complete acceptance of his political ideas.

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only after the insurgents had had some initial successes. In the Dominican Republic, the largest and most successful force of the extreme left has been neither of the two small Communist parties, but the 14th of June Movement which contains many non-Communists among its members and which boasts a past record of courageous opposition to the Trujillo dictatorship. In Bolivia, Juan Lechin's National Party of the Revolutionary Left poses more potential threat to the government than do the several Communist organizations there. Indeed, if the International Communist Movement continues in its present disunified state, these home-grown revolutionary organizations are likely to become more significant. They have shown that they can play the anti-Yankee theme as shrilly as the Communists; they generally have more audacious leaders with greater freedom of action; they have a particular attraction for youth; and they can center their appeal convincingly on nationalist goals and popular aspirations.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:



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Chairman

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